KANSAS
KANSAS
THE SUNFLOWER STATE
SMOKY HILLS
ANSAS
MISSOURI
OKLAHOMA
ARKANS
Stockton
Hill City
WaKeeney
Russell
Hays
Great Bend
Larned
Hutchinson
Kinsley
Stafford
Pratt
Greensburg
Kingman
Medicine Lodge
Ashland
Buffalo
Alva
Seiling
Watonga
Weatherford
Oklahoma City
Elk City
Hobart
Anadarko
Chickasha
Purcell
Norman
Moore
Shawnee
Tecumseh
Noble
Seminole
Choctaw
Mustang
Ada
Paula Valley
Altus
Cushing
Sapulpa
Tulsa
Broken Arrow
Bixby
Wagoner
Tahlequah
Muskogee
Okmulgee
Sallisaw
Henryetta
Stigler
Miami
Nowata
Vinita
Grove
Skiatook
Owasso
Claremore
Siloam Springs
Coffeyville
Independence
Parsons
Joplin
Carthage
Springfield
Republic
Aurora
Monett
Neosho
Pea Ridge NMP
Bentonville
Rogers
Springdale
Eureka Springs
Fayetteville
Marshfield
Bolivar
Warsaw
Lake of the Ozarks
Harrisonville
Warrensburg
Sedalia
Boonville
Columbia
Jefferson City
Fulton
Carrollton
Excelsior Springs
Moberly
Mexico
Marshall
Kansas City
Lees Summit
Independence
Topeka
Junction City
Manhattan
Lyons
Council Grove
Ottawa
Abilene
Salina
Lincoln
Osborne
Turtle Creek Lake
Liberty
Lawrence
Olathe
Eldon
Rolla
Batesville
Marshall
Huber Springs
Conway
Little Rock
Morrilton
Russellville
Fort Smith
Stigler
Indian Nation
Arkansas
Canadian
North Canadian
Salt Fork
Cimarron
Woodward
Ozark National Scenic River

Marco holds on to the small, velvet box, hesitating before passing it over. "You won't drop it?" he asks.

"Look, just because I showed up late-"

"-for my wedding-"

"-for your wedding-"

"-and you're my best man-"

"-Gah! Such pressure!" I fumble with the cummerbund, turning it until it was centered over my belly. Or at least close enough. "It wasn't my fault. My mom hasn't set the clocks forward for daylight savings time yet-"

"-which should have been done weeks ago-" Marco tugs my cummerbund to it's *just right* position.

"-yeah, you know how she is. Anyway, I'm here now." I hold out my hand, palm down. "Look. Steady as a rock."

Marco moves to give me the ring. I make the hand shake wildly.

"Oops," I fling it behind my back. "Try this one," I offer my other hand, palm up.

Marco sighs. He places the box in my hand.

"Let's go."

***

Luckily, we make it to the church in time, and I am able to stand next to my best friend as he marries his High School sweetheart. No, really, she is still in High School. Seventeen years old. Marco, the man himself, only nineteen.

Too young, some would say. Most would say. But they don't know Marco like I do. The earth will turn, the sun will rise, God will rule in heaven, and Marco will be married to this one woman - girl, now, but woman soon enough - for the rest of their long, fruitful lives.

Such certainty. It is more than I deserve, being counted among those to witness the event. And I surely don't deserve the honor of standing at the groom's right hand, holding the ring. Well, I suppose that's another advantage of having grown up in a small Kansas town. No competition. I didn't have to be that good to be a best man.

***

After the ceremony, chaos. Pictures are wanted, names are shouted out, flashbulbs and laughter, hugs and handshakes. During a lull, I'm called to the parking-lot for a consultation.

"What do you think?" Don asks. He and a crew of helpers stand next to the honeymoon car - a workhorse wood-paneled station wagon; 'Just Married' soaped on the rear window and a dozen empty soda cans tied to the bumper.

"Great," I say. "Fine." Then, as I get closer and look in the window, I see a scattering of popcorn over the front seat.

"What's that?"

"That's a prank. You know, fill the car up with popcorn so...."

"Funny," I agree, "But don't you think there should be more? That's, like, not a lot of popcorn." In truth, the front seat doesn't look any worse than having taken a sharp turn with a bag of old movie theater 'corn riding shotgun.

Don shrugs.

I get money from my wallet and tell him, "Go to Wal-Mart. They sell those big bags of the stuff for cheap. You know what I'm talking about? Looks like garbage bags? Sometimes cheesy flavored; or caramel? Get as many as you can."

Don grabs some friends, and they hurry away. Robert, one of Marco's younger brothers, stands by my side. "That's going to be messy," he says.

I laugh. "Yeah."

"Shouldn't you stop that sort of thing?"

"What?"

"You're the best man. Shouldn't you stop them from doing that?"

I look at Robert for a moment. "I don't know," is my honest answer.

***

The reception. I'm introduced to one of the bridesmaids - a pretty redhead named Anne, and we dance. We dance goofy in a group. We dance slow together. We talk about the bride and groom. We talk about ourselves. She's studying management at K-State. I've moved south, to attend the University of Houston where the temperature is more apropos for a young man ready to set the world on fire.

During a break, I leave her with friends to fetch refreshments. Since everybody in the wedding party is underage, drink choices are Sprite and Coke.

Sprite or Coke....

While making the decision, I hear a voice behind me say, "Decline and fall."

I turn. Christine Kohler stands there, dressed to the nines, smile beaming, blonde hair done fancy in a way I'd never seen on her before.

"Fall down baby!" I say, finishing the lyrics of a song that had somehow become our special salutation. I grab her in a hug.

We laugh. We hold each other at arm's length. "Look at you," I say. Chrisy Kohler, my High School running buddy, almost unrecognizable now with that blown-out hair and wearing an honest-to-goodness dress. Never a petite girl, the freshman fifteen strains the silky

yellow fabric in nice places, as well as around her middle. The dress' neckline is much, much lower than her usual wardrobe of sweatshirts and Ts.

"A lot more of me, right?"

"Fornicate that. You look great."

"You clean up pretty good yourself."

"Where have you been? I didn't see you during the ceremony, or the dance."

"No surprise. You looked like you were going to pass out from the pressure of having to stand still for an hour. Anyway, I was in the back, with the cool kids."

I lean in. She smells of cigarettes. Chrisy smirks. "And we cool kids tend to hang out in the parking-lot during these John Barleycorn Must Die Baptists shindigs. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know how it is."

"Besides." Chrisy hip-checks me hard enough that I must steady myself against the drink table. "You're doing alright without me." She motions across the room towards Anne who is huddled with a group of girls, all of them eyeballing me while smiling and giggling into their hands.

"Can you pop the collar of a tuxedo?" I ask, giving it a try. "I feel as if I should pop my collar."

Chirsy makes the judgment call. "Perfect! Looks absolutely stupid."

I become Elvis. "Uh hunka hunka," I mumble, pelvis suddenly on a swivel, index fingers pointing nowhere in particular.

Chrisy goes upside my head. "Fool." Then, with her hand still on my back, she moves in front of me, face to face. Close. Intimate. I'm tall; we're almost eye-to-eye. A big girl. She places her other hand behind my neck and, with a caress, fixes the collar.

"You haven't changed," she says. Her pretty face, inches from mine, tilts slightly. "And in a way that's very sad." She smiles ruefully.

"Now." She steps back and slaps my tux into shape. "Get over there before Red realizes what a big mistake she's making."

I make a derisive noise. "She can wait. I'm not done talking with you."

"Yes, you are." Chrisy grabs a two-liter bottle from the table. "Besides, I'm due back at the parking-lot. There's some very important rum waiting for coke.... Er. I mean, there's some very important people waiting for me." She backs away, doing the Queen of England hand-wave.

"Hey," I call out. "Don't leave without saying goodbye."

Then she's gone.

***

The popcorn thing is a disaster. Never quick to anger, Marco has always been more of the slow-burn type, so I can see his temperature rise by degrees as he circles the station wagon. Through the car's windows, nothing but popcorn. Crammed to the roof. Marco opens the passenger's side causing an avalanche of the greasy stuff. Gloria, his young bride, moves to avoid having it cover her shoes. Water fills her eyes, threatening to spill over.

The gathered crowd laughs and hoots, maybe a little nervous because just popcorn might have been a good gag; but this greasy, buttery Wal-Mart gunk is well over the line. Nevertheless, we can't let the night end on a bad note, so we move into action. Girls swarm Gloria, cooing comfort, while us boys start shoveling. We get enough of it off the seats, but the residue is something else entirely. Marco's worried about his rented tuxedo and Gloria's dress. I rather suspect you could toast a marshmallow over his head by now.

There are blankets in the trunk of my car. We use them to cover the seats. Marco's grumbling about irreparable damage, but it’s been a long day. Time to go.

We have a moment alone, away from the crowd. I congratulate him. Shake his hand. This is my best friend. We've gone to school together for twelve years. Since kindergarten. I can't remember a time when we didn't know and like each other. Soccer leagues, camping; building things, tearing things down. Bad movies and video games. Cars and girls. Between Marco and I, all the mysteries of the universe have been discussed and settled. And we aren't even twenty years old.

I let go his hand. I'll never be part of another friendship like this one.

We make no plans. He's off to start a life. I'm gone to Texas. We'll see each other again, maybe.

I say goodbye to the best part of my childhood one more time. Maybe the last time.

And he's a little pissed. And I'm more than a little guilty.

***

I still have a few days before leaving town, so I get redhead Anne's number and we make a date for tomorrow night. She gives me a quick hug then rushes away to catch up with friends. Heh. Pop that collar, son.

Brooms and trash cans are found. I help clean the offensive popcorn off the ground. Some night birds squawk, but we're doing them a favor. Eating that stuff will kill you!

The party has ended. The reception hall is closing. I'm jawing with stragglers in the lobby, all of us unwilling to call it quits. Management must chase us out.

Magical nights like this don't happen often, so it feels odd just leaving when it's over.

But a surprise waits for me in the parking-lot. Chrisy has parked her El Camino next to my K-Car and is sitting on the lowered gate, smoking a cigarette with a plastic cup in hand, a black leather jacket draped over her shoulders against the chill.

I laugh at the sight. She motions for me to sit next to her. "What?" she asks.

"You look so dangerous. Like the women momma warned me about." I perch myself on the gate, bumping her butt with mine as I settle.

"Watch it." She holds her cup high to prevent it from spilling.

There are several brown grocery bags behind us. I rummage through them and grab the first bottle I find. Triple Sec. Disgusting. Almost undrinkable unless mixed with something. Almost.

"Do you mind?" I take a cup and prepare to pour.

Chrisy arches an eyebrow. She blows smoke out the corner of her mouth.

I freeze. Waiting for approval. "Well?"

"You don't drink," she says.

"Lies!" I roar. "Slander and lies!"

She shrugs. I pour. I offer my cup for a toast. Slowly, reluctantly, she taps it with her own. "To Marco and Gloria," I say. Then gulp huge.

Chrisy sips.

When my breath returns, I ask, "What's the matter?"

After a moment, she repeats, "You don't drink, Virgil. I've never seen you drink."

"To be fair, Chrisy, there are many things you've never seen me do."

"Yeah. Thank God for that. But Virgil? You don't drink."

True to a point. I didn't drink in High School. And, because Chrisy knows me so well, she knows why. I come from a long line of alcoholics. Functional, but drunks, nonetheless. Indeed, alcoholism broke up my family's home. I'm sure at some point in our long and cherished friendship I had told Chrisy that I would never drink because I didn't want to wind up like that. Broken.

However, moving away to college taught me a lot of new and interesting things about being broken. I had assumed booze was a wrecking ball, but it's not. It's a needle. And if used properly it can stitch you back together. Or close enough.

"Skip it," I say. "Talk to me. Hey, you still see Jeff? What's going on with him?"

"No." Chrisy shakes her head. "Nope. You talk to me. What happened? You used to be so.... Jesus Christ about drinking."

"Actually, Jesus drank like a fish-"

"-Virgil-"

"-Wine, but you had to back then. Water was full of dinosaur piss-"

"-I'm serious, Virg. What happened?"

I look away. Then I laugh. "What the hell, Chrisy? Who are you...? I mean, you're not exactly the temperance union sitting there."

"Here," she hands me her cup. "Drink."

"What?"

She glares. I obey. It's coke. Just coke.

"So?" I ask. "You're slowing down. That's just smart drinking, taking a break every once and awhile."

"No, Virgil, it's been coke all night. I stopped drinking years ago. I just pretend because.... Because I want to fit in. That never bothered you, though. You always stood your ground. I remember how they used to pressure you then make fun of you at parties when you wouldn't drink. How you always turned it around, made them look stupid. I admired you for that."

"Chrisy...,"

"Now look at you. Straight Triple Sec? Oh, Virgil. What the hell happened?"

***

What happened? I *met a girl. She broke my heart. Now I drink. You want it expanded? Her name was Shubra, born in Indian, and about the most exotic, beautiful thing I'd ever seen. And before you say it, yes, I guess I did have to go to a foreign country to get laid.*

Okay. I'm going to stop doing that. Joking, always joking. Neither of us deserve it.

It wasn't just looks; she had an enormous personality. She was fearless. And smart. Effortlessly smart. She aced every class without ever cracking a book.

But she was damaged. Abused. She could be reckless, borderline suicidal.

I thought I could save her. With love.

Oh, right. I said I would stop joking. Mea culpa.

She was my first, and I, hers. Later I would have good reason to examine everything she said for a lie, but not that. Never that. It was obvious.

I asked her to marry me. She smiled for an answer.

Once, before I left campus to spend a holiday with my brother in Louisiana, she told me she was pregnant. Again, I proposed marriage. I didn't even get a smile that time.

When I returned, she claimed to have had an abortion. I asked no details, none were forthcoming.

Things got worse between us, then better, then worse; and so forth.

During one of the bad times, she came to my room. She stripped without saying a word. She started in on me and I reciprocated. I could tell it was wrong, her head was wrong. She was

angry, cold, insistent. She was so wrong, but still I tried to make it right. God help me, I tried harder to make it right at that moment than I've ever tried to do anything else in my life. More, I know, than I ever will.

When it was over, she quit the bed and dressed with her back towards me. She might have left as she entered - smoldering and silent. But she didn't. She turned said something she shouldn't have.

I flew at her. I grabbed her. I pinned her to the bed. Ridiculous in my nakedness, I straddled her and forced her down with hands full of murder.

And the look on her face.... The scornful, dead-eyed look on her face....

It's a picture you can't forget. The best you can do is to keep washing it with alcohol until it fades.

***

"I grew up," I answer Chrisy, reaching for a refill.

She waits until I've poured and drank then says, "That's it?"

We lock eyes. "Pretty much."

Time passes. I look away first.

"I guess you have changed," Chrisy says, pushing herself off the gate. "And it is sad."

"Where are you going?"

"Home. It's late."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much."

"Chrisy, come on. This?" I upturn my cup, splattering booze all over the pavement. "It's no big deal."

"I know. I'm just tired. Can you please get off so I can close the gate?

I oblige, closing it for her. "Well, I'm still in town a few days. Did you want...?"

"No. I can't. I'm leaving tomorrow." She checks her watch. "Today."

"Okay." I step aside so she can get in the driver's seat. Before she closes the door, I say, "So... Bye?"

"Yeah. Bye."

The door shuts. The ignition fires. She hooks an elbow over the seat to reverse out of the parking spot. Once the grill is pointed towards home, she gives me one last look.

"Hey!" I say, loud enough to be heard over the engine and through the closed window. "Decline and fall!"

She drives away, shaking her head.

End

Blame this on anonymity, plausible deniability, and the void that degrades quality. Which is a shame because The Rainmakers *deserve better. Well. It had to be done. No other band comes close to having the same impact or being as important to me as* The Rainmakers*. They were the soundtrack to the best years of my life. So many memories associated with their songs.... Tch. My drama teacher told me she'd 'hung out with' (implication: dated) one of the band members at KU. "The drummer," she'd said, "Pat, I think." and I couldn't keep my puppy eyes off her after that. Picture me laying on my belly on the school's stage, ankles crossed, chin resting in entwined fingers; "Tell me more about him, Ms. Scovill. He smelled nice, right?" And if Rich Ruth ever sees me coming, he'd better turn the other way because I played bass guitar in a college band, and I'll become* Annie Wilkes *on him so fast. There's no telling what I'd sledgehammer just to get him reminiscing about Doo Dad.*